

Other Peoples' Flowers:

Some Personal Reflections on Researching as an Outsider

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*I'm an American
paid by the Japanese
to say how you think*

I hadn't intended anything so lofty (or insidious) when I applied to the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for a research grant entitled "Maximising the Benefits of ICT/Multimedia in the South Pacific: Cultural Pedagogy and Usability Factors" (Robbins 2004), while working at the Media Centre of the University of the South Pacific (USP). I just wanted to think in a practical way about how "we" could make technology that would be useful "here," with "you" in mind. As the educational multimedia developer for a university serving twelve island nations in the South Pacific, I knew that my target audience differed substantially from the people I had been focusing on when I worked in the United States and Europe, so I began to look for ways to determine just how my approach should differ. Situated in an urban office in the capital city of Fiji, thousands of kilometers from the students I was supposed to design for, I knew I had to find other perspectives.

I began by meeting with staff and students from as many countries as I could within USP's scope, and received a grant to extend this research into the countries themselves. In a region ignored by the focus groups that determine the design of technology and software, my goal was to determine how educators and students in the South Pacific could best use computers for educational purposes. The initial question was: How exactly should I design software so that it would be most usable and useful for the people of the region?

Yet the questions got bigger, and pretty soon I wasn't just talking about computers and people but found myself making broad pronouncements about "Learning in the Pacific" (unsure if I should say "in Oceania" instead). Even simple pronouns like

“we,” I,” and “you” seemed to need defining. And what could “here” possibly mean when it referred to twelve different countries scattered over thirty-three million square kilometers of ocean?

*i fear
like so many white fingers
trying to force new flowers
into a tightly wound kakala
that i'll never get in
or i'll unravel it
and string petals
without ever understanding
how it was woven
in the first place*

Over the past year, I had been looking at learning approaches in the South Pacific, trying to figure out how to create educational multimedia that would catered to these approaches. After reading some of the work of Konai Helu Thaman (1992, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003), Richard Wah (1997), and Ruby Va'a (1997, 2000), I wanted to put what I had read into action in the area of multimedia. My goal was not to promote the use of multimedia as such, but rather to promote a consideration of how multimedia tools might be used in the regional context. Of course, to accomplish this assumed that I *could* understand the regional context, and that multimedia tools were appropriate.

THE PLAN

In preparing for this project I continued my reading. Alongside the dialogues on indigenous pedagogy and epistemology, I read those of post-colonialism and cultural imperialism. Thus, alongside the voices that advised me how I might better understand the diverse cultures of the region were those that told me I had no right to do so. As Claire Smith, Heather Burke, and Graeme Ward put it, “in some quarters, any research relating to cultural matters by outsiders might not be welcomed by Indigenous peoples”

(2000, 19). And in this age of international aid and good governance, “the precise point at which interest and concern become imperializing appropriation is a hotly contested one” (Hutcheon 1995, 133).

When considered within the context of the Oceania’s legacy of colonialism, the drive to understand the region’s cultures in terms of “western” formal education and, more recently, technology, can be seen as another post-colonial “settling” of Oceanic culture. Are these efforts—which are funded, defined, and directed by the “post-colonizers”—condemned to be useless to the cultures they are aimed at? More perniciously, are they part of a postmodern colonization of those aspects of Oceanic cultures the colonizers have not yet managed to westernize? As Linda Tuhiwai Smith has phrased it, “research was talked about in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument. It told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs” (1999, 3).

There were distinctions based on geography, ethnicity, and history that I needed to make as a researcher, but others I felt I had no right, as an outsider, to be claiming. Although my lines of questioning—Which layout do you prefer? What parts of this program did you find helpful?—were unlikely to stir up questions of cultural heritage and ownership, I was still uncomfortable making generalizations about others’ cultures based on their responses.

To deal with these concerns, I developed two basic guidelines for my work, in addition to the obvious ones of providing feedback and transparency with informants:

1. Do not approach this as a comparative study. “The West” does not constitute a norm against which to evaluate other cultures; rather, examine people’s approaches to learning in their own contexts.

I took this approach very seriously, going so far as to avoid framing the study as a search for the most effective ways of using educational technology in the region, as that would necessarily have defined learning approaches by how well they succeeded within established western institutional constructs. Rather, I aimed to learn the various ways in

which regional learning approaches could be applied to educational multimedia development. Although I tested the practicality of solutions suggested in later stages of the project, I was careful not to let utility serve as a structuring research question.

2. Be aware of the all-too-easy trap of using “culture” as an unassailable mystifier.

I found it became easy to hide behind the enticing veneer of “culturespeak” (Goldsmith 2003), labeling everything as “cultural.” Parents, class, or choice of academic major play important roles that will be buried if we always resort to the often loosely defined but exciting catchall of “culture.” In other words, the term “culture” could often become a vague cover for something more specific. So I needed to remind myself, “If you are talking about USP students, focus on USP students. If you are talking about urban students, or I-Kiribati students, be sure to construct your sample accordingly.” Without these reminders, I found I could create potentially false distinctions of “traditional culture” or “Micronesian culture,” when I was really speaking of much more specific distinctions. For example, a generalization about the importance of creating educational technology that targets “Micronesian culture” was met with respectful nods, and it took internal searching for me to realize I was really targeting urban students in Kiribati. Thus, the notion of culture, used sloppily, often tended to mystify rather than clarify my research questions.

THE PROCESS

Before I discuss the limitations I encountered during the study itself (as opposed to the conceptual bogeymen I unearthed during my background research), I’d like to start with a poem I wrote “at” me from what I imagined to be an insider’s perspective:

among roots
i feel your thoughts
starving

between roots

“i cannot speak for them”

you try

it’s easy to gaze at

and clip

other people’s flowers

they’re not using them

you say

so i must

I say “what I imagined” because that is as close as I ever came to experiencing firsthand the resistance from Islanders that I feared after my literature review. Having read so many heated debates on outsider research, I expected some backlash when I actually began to conduct my own. Instead, I found a diverse group of helpful colleagues glad to see their cultures the focus of educational technology development, and eager to contribute their ideas and experiences.

However, I do realize that most dissent aimed at my work will be exhibited through silence or inaction, or expressed in venues to which I am not privy. There is no licensing system for researching another’s culture, and any created in the current post-colonial environment would likely be defined by the same foreign constructs such a system would aim to avoid. The true check of power (which I must assume I unwittingly encounter with regularity) are the silences and polite lies of those I interview, which I often mistakenly attribute to shyness or misguided attempts to tell me what they think I want to hear.

An example of this occurred during the process of translating the educational multimedia. After we completed development of the project in English, we translated the audio and visual materials into a dozen different languages used in the South Pacific. When one of the Solomon Islands Pidgin translators was making corrections to his work, I noticed that he was having some difficulty reading the text. I found him speaking the terms out loud—in a way, he was listening rather than simply reading. When I asked him why, he responded that he found it difficult to read the text, since people didn’t usually

write out long passages in Pidgin, and that its proper use was more as a spoken language than a written one.

I enquired further: “So, what language would you tend to write and read in?”

He responded: “English. But speak it in Pidgin.”

The translator had diligently transcribed entire passages in Pidgin so they could be displayed as text along with the voiceovers in the multimedia, yet he felt uncomfortable informing me that it was a useless exercise. This reminded me of the town criers who had agreed to publicize training sessions I had organized as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Knowing full well that the announced activities were taking place at times that conflicted with most people’s schedules, or had no practical use in the village, they made the pointless announcements as a benefit to me. I imagine they did it out of a sense of goodwill toward the plans about which I was clearly so excited.

Thus at that point I assumed that silences—both of dissent and of information not offered—were my greatest limitations. It would require many more years in more social venues, developing more personal relationships with colleagues, for me to begin to receive the feedback I sought; yet there will always remain ideas off-limits or incomprehensible to me.

For instance, there is a set of “Pacific” concepts that are mystical to me, such as the notion of cyclical time, which I was unable to distill into the structured forms necessary for inclusion in a research report. I encountered ideas, such as interconnectedness and personal relationships in learning approaches, which informed my work on the surface level, and had much deeper repercussions than my more “objective” or dispassionate experience with education was able to accommodate. In a way, I embrace these limitations as an outsider because they protect these concepts from my potential mistranslation and appropriation.

And so, unable and unwilling to represent an authentic voice of Oceania myself, I felt it necessary to limit my role to that of collator rather than creator of ideas, making explicit the cultural biases and limitations implicit in that role. First, as an outsider, I could not possibly comprehend fully the culture I was trying to understand, and certainly not in a one-year research and development project largely conducted from behind a desk or interviewer’s clipboard (though occasionally under a tree chewing betel nut or seated

around a tanoa). Therefore, I limited my conclusions to those given to me by the people whose cultures I encountered.

Second, as an outsider, I had no right to try to determine the tools, constructs, priorities, and applications of understanding another culture (Kathie Irwin, cited in Smith 1999, 38). To attempt to do so would be to perpetuate the colonial history of subsuming (exploiting and annihilating) the culture of the “other,” a practice still very much alive when foreign constructs still define so much. As Bobby Sykes put it, “What? Post-colonialism? Have they left?” (quoted in Smith 1999, 24).

So where does that leave me? It seems I must accept that I am ill equipped by virtue of my heritage to do what interests me most here, and I must admit that the solutions I try to develop that will allow me to work within another’s culture boil down to more attempts to humble and make objective a role considered by many to be intrinsically self-important and subjective.

I should point out that I have polarized my views to make my concerns more obvious. The implications of these reflections would seem to be that I cannot and should not work here in the Pacific. Yet I do, and find it fulfilling and invigorating. I have much to learn, and am excited to do so. I feel that my role is valuable, even if only as a chopping block for people from the region to use to cut through to deeper understandings.

THE RESULT

The aim of providing a chopping block that staff and students can use to select their own approaches and develop their own learning materials became central to the development of educational multimedia in this study. Rather than employing prescriptive strategies designed to accommodate specific regional learning approaches, I focused on providing a broad and adaptive toolset that relied on staff and student selection and modification (Robbins 2004, 2006a, 2006b).

For instance, one facet of development dealt with providing alternate ways of experiencing the same information: simple outlines, exploratory graphical interfaces, and dialogue-centered interactive quizzes. We offered a history lesson in over a dozen regional languages and portrayed information in multiple layers of depth and simplicity. Even the media choice of the CD-ROM was flexible, as it could be run as an interactive

CD-ROM on a computer, or a simple audio CD on a CD-player, with each track giving the lesson in a different language.

The other major facet focused on empowering students and teachers by providing multimedia toolsets that encouraged multiple perspectives and enabled them to customize learning materials for their own cultural contexts. In this way, I was able to provide for a wide variety of learning approaches, and to enable others to fill in areas I may have overlooked or underemphasized. Regional USP staff and students completed most of the development work, and the end product was designed so that it could be modified by people with a wider range of technical skills than the usual multimedia program. In this way, I attempted to open authorship of the project to a wider group in the region. We released all of the software as open source, encouraging developers from the cultures within the study to modify and distribute the package as they saw fit.

I also encouraged participants to view the work not as a final product, but as the beginnings of a tool people could use to create their own educational tools for their own purposes. And this is the direction I see most relevant for me, as an outsider researching and developing educational technology in others' cultures: beginning to strip away the confining parameters of technology development to provide general toolsets that can be situated in a variety of contexts without a high degree of technological proficiency. I acknowledge that the tools developed are still only accessible to the confidently computer literate, and that the toolsets themselves were created in a project lead by an outsider. I know that stripping away barriers requires judgment calls, and that simplification involves making a number of decisions for the end user. As I embark on my future work—creating more tangible and less “techy” interfaces to development on computers—I hope at least that my sensitivity to my roles and legacy as an outside researcher will produce technology that can be better situated in the cultures for which it is designed. I hope that this essay will encourage others in my position to consider their own roles with the same rigor.

This paper was written while I was serving as multimedia specialist at the Media Centre of the University of the South Pacific. The poetry was composed in 2003, while I was reflecting on the research project discussed in this paper.

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